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Geographies of impact: power, participation and potential

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Rachel Pain

Centre for Social Justice and Community Action

Department of Geography

Durham University

Durham, DH1 3LE

UK rachel.pain@durham.ac.uk

Mike Kesby

School of Geography and Geosciences

University of St Andrews

North Street

St Andrews, KY16 9AL

UK mike.kesby@st-andrews.ac.uk

Kye Askins

Division of Geography

Northumbria University

Ellison Place

Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST

UK kye.askins@northumbria.ac.uk

Geographies of impact: power, participation and potential

Rachel Pain, Mike Kesby and Kye Askins

Abstract

In this paper we offer a critique and an alternative to current proposals to include the economic and social impacts of research in the next UK audit of academic research. In contrast to most responses from UK academics, our argument is for impact; while the growing marketisation of knowledge is to be deplored, resources and activities within universities do have a vital role to play in progressive social change. The problem is that the current proposals will produce and retrench an elite model of power/knowledge relationships. We propose an understanding of impact based on the co-production of knowledge between universities and communities, modelled in research practice in participatory geographies. This is more likely to result in more equitable and radically transformative impacts of knowledge, making us socially accountable rather than driven by economic accountancy.

Introduction: the impacts of audit

Even before British geographers had digested the confounding outcomes of the UK's last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in December 2008¹, the restless machine of higher education governance was already generating a successor: consultation on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) ran between 2007 and 2009, and its first assessment is expected to take place in 2014. Reflecting on this latest iteration of academic audit from a post-positivist perspective, it seems almost crass to point out that any new techniques of measurement will, like their predecessors, not simply record empirical facts but actively produce the very

¹ For us, based on average ranking, these outcomes were respectively: joint first but a reduction in income (Durham); joint fifth and an increase in income (St Andrews); no submission and no income (Northumbria) (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/table/2008/dec/18/rae-2008-geography-environment-studies>, accessed 3rd August 2010).

phenomena under investigation. Indeed the impacts of REF are already being experienced by academics who are highly tuned to the metrics of audit. In the majority of 'research active' UK Geography Departments (i.e. those which pursue research and its outcomes in ways that conform to what is audited), there has been little pause for breath as, disciplined by managers, peers and self, we refocus our efforts on the latest shifting goalposts of audit. For those in institutions who did not make a submission to the RAE because the effort was deemed greater than the probable minimal returns, it is now understood that we must be involved in the auditing framework this time around to avoid the 'non-research active' status that resulted in our exclusion from a range of funding streams and activities.

The impacts of audit on ongoing practices do not only emerge in response to clear targets; one of the experienced tyrannies of RAE and REF is that specific assessment targets have rarely been provided sufficiently far in advance. This has less to do with any scientific remit not to pollute the data than with the limitations of the mechanisms of measurement. The effect of uncertainty in the academic market place is that academics and institutions speculate constantly about exactly how the broad categories of research 'quality' (published outputs, research income, and research environment) will be applied, seizing immediately upon all announcements and rumours and trying to plan ahead. Subsequently, much time and effort is absorbed trying to second guess, for example, what products might be constituted as 'paradigm-shifting' as opposed to mundane; the number of outputs each academic should produce; which journals to publish in; the consequence of authorial listing in joint papers; what expectations should be made of fractional staff and those who have taken career breaks, and so on. As others have documented over the last decade, while the gymnastics of audit have not improved the health, wellbeing and morale of geographers, they have significantly shaped the nature of geographical research, and reinforced an inequitable distribution of resources and influence across the higher education sector (see Berg 2004; Birnie et al 2005; Minca 2000; Shelton et al 2001; Short 2002; Sidaway 1997).

Another pernicious effect of these research audits is that they absorb so much of academics' creative energies, orientating them in very specific ways and, we would argue, narrowing our

capacities and potential contributions. For example, in critical human geography, one visible legacy of RAE is a substantial increase in high quality scholarly articles situated in anti-neoliberal, post-colonialist, anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-globalisation, pro-humane politics; but not necessarily a growth in engagements beyond the journal article (Cahill and Torre 2007) that might contribute directly to these struggles. Academics complain that the audit game leaves them with little time or energy to exert on projects that 'do not count', and meanwhile the master narrative of audit so governs our everyday practices that many seem unable to imagine an academy constructed or lived otherwise (mrs kinpaisby 2008).

In this short observation we respond to recent plans to include for the first time the economic and social impacts of research in UK research assessment. While these plans have largely received a negative reaction from the academy, our view, as participatory geographers committed to the co-production of knowledge between Universities and wider communities, is in support of recognition of work that engages beyond the academy. Nonetheless, against the backdrop outlined above, the proposals are highly problematic. As Gregson et al (forthcoming) suggest, the impact agenda may be further evidence of neoliberalism, but may also provide opportunities to counter it, and here we argue for a more radically transformative and equitable framework for assessment.²

The impact agenda: the disciplinary response

After considerable uncertainty which has not wholly dissipated, the REF looks to be largely similar in its demands to the RAE, with the exception of a new subcategory of assessment labelled 'impact'. In its second REF consultation, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE 2009) suggests that for the first time a proportion of the government funding

² This commentary builds upon a response we submitted to HEFCE on behalf of the Participatory Geographies Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers (www.pygyrg.org.uk).

that it distributes for research will be allocated on the basis of the ‘demonstrable benefits [of research] to the wider economy and society’. Currently this proportion is proposed at 25%³.

Responses to this new, as yet loosely-defined, metric of impact have been vociferous and largely negative across all sectors of the UK higher education sector. Debate has primarily hinged on whether it is legitimate to assess academic research in this way (the majority opinion seems to be that it is not) and, if so, what percentage of the final audit generated score should be attributed to impact (almost all responses suggest that 25% is ‘too much’) (e.g. British Academy 2009; Corbyn 2009a, 2009b; RGS-IBG 2010). Our trade union response has been uncompromising: the University and College Union robustly rejects the new metric as a significant threat to academic freedom (UCU 2009). A UCU pan-disciplinary survey of 600 senior professors in the UK suggested, remarkably, that a third were considering leaving the country because of the impact agenda (Corbyn 2010). The REF pilot project conducted in 2010 has raised a range of concerns among researchers and universities, although the Director of HEFCE has indicated that while the proposals may be modified, impact is here to stay (Jump 2010; Reisz 2010).

The strength of responses from the academy is focused, of course, on ensuring that the higher education sector (but more particularly the most elite elements and activities within it) retains its share of funding. Our own professional body, the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) has given a discipline-specific response on behalf of the UK community of geographers (RGS-IBG 2010). While expressing a cautious optimism, this shares some of the general concerns expressed above, arguing that a very broad definition of research impact and research users is needed, and suggesting that in terms of the weighting of impact, 15-20% ‘seems appropriate’. Although this response included some of the concerns that we had raised in our response to the consultation (for example around the question of ‘scaling impact’, which we come to below), it omits or underplays other issues that we see as central. Moreover, the implication is that this new metric will represent just another way of

³ The current proposals are that 60% of funding will be allocated on the basis of outputs (e.g. articles, books), 25% on impact, and 15% on environment (e.g. funding, postgraduate numbers) (HEFCE 2009).

accounting for what geographers already do, with little recognition that it might actively shape how the academy might work differently.

Scholars on the political left, including geographers, have much to say about impact. It is widely seen as symptomatic of the growing corporatisation of the UK academy, which for Smith (2010) now far outpaces that of US universities. Others ask 'what kind of state-regulated notion of "impact" and public accountability, if any, can be compatible with critical political imperatives, and what will be the status of idiosyncratic, creative, and exilic work in this shifting knowledge economy?' (Jazeel 2010). In practical terms, there are concerns about universities becoming wary of submitting research to the REF that is controversial or critical of government (Reisz 2010). Meth and Williams (2010) raise the prospect that, if geographers pursue this new metric, it may have a negative effect on relations and ethical practice with the vulnerable people who are often the focus of our research. And yet many left scholars (including the three of us), while deploring the growing emphasis on the economic valuing of knowledge, also feel strongly that resources and activities within universities do have a vital role to play in progressive social change. Key within this position is that the form and pathways of those processes of interaction between researchers, projects, knowledges and wider society should look very different to the producer/consumer business model increasingly encouraged by successive UK governments.

Assessing research impact: a perspective from participatory geographies

Despite the reservations of so many in geography and beyond, we therefore want to be more optimistic about the impact agenda. We value academic independence and curiosity-driven research (see Phillips 2010), as do many of those who oppose the reform, and we have no desire to see government functionaries impose a dry utilitarianism on universities that measures benefits primarily with reference to short-term audit/electoral cycles. Nor are we naïve enough to expect that research demonstrating economic impacts, and/or addressing elite beneficiaries such as business and government, will not be first in line for reward over research that has demonstrable social, cultural or environmental impacts and which addresses less elite users.

But our response is a strategic engagement intended to help push the mechanisms of audit in directions that produce useful academic practices beyond the journal article. While we have been critical of the RAE for some years (mrs kinpaisby 2008), our stance reflects our commitment to research which pursues positive social change in partnership with non-academics, not just as research users whose knowledge and activities are to be ‘impacted’, but as collaborators who shape research agendas and play a role in directing research processes and outcomes. We encourage those who so robustly reject the ‘impact agenda’ to reflect on the degree to which their own position manifests an investment in a very particular construction of the purpose, practices and outputs of the academy, reproduced over two decades of RAE audit. Along with others oriented by a commitment to the principle of social justice in and through research, we have argued that geographical practice can exceed the business of mapping and explaining unjust structures and unequal places (e.g. Askins 2008; Kesby 2000; Pain 2003). Might it even be possible that the impact agenda presents radical scholars with new opportunities to exceed the apparent limits of the audit game, in ways that allow geographical research to contribute to wider struggles for social change? While impact is beginning as a metric of audit, we are interested to explore the degree to which it might be mobilised to further push for a model of academic accountability that amounts to more than the current exercise in academic accountancy (mrs kinpaisby 2008). The proposed provisional methodology of assessment (HEFCE 2009) has some positive features: it recognises a time lag may exist between research and impact, rather than insisting that impacts must neatly fall within the sample frame of an single audit cycle; it stipulates that users will be involved in assessing impact; and is very clear that not all academics are impelled to engage in impactful research⁴.

Rather than perceiving only threats in the impact agenda, then, we seek to bring a politics of positive anticipation to the REF and its impact agenda. We argue below for a more radically transformative and equitable framework for assessment which is better placed to produce impactful and accountable geographical practices. We propose three ways in which the notion

⁴ The current proposal is that each unit of assessment (i.e. department, school or research institute) should only submit one ‘case study’ for every 5 to 10 FTE academic staff.

of 'impact' might be reworked towards this goal. The issues we raise relate not only to the REF, but also apply more widely to the current zeitgeist for University/public engagement that has been felt as keenly in geography as elsewhere (see Fuller and Askins 2010).

Unpacking the meaning of impact

Impact is a two way relationship

Although the definition of impact in the HEFCE document is fairly loose, it is largely constructed as a one-way process; with University-generated research conceived as impacting on a society beyond neatly defined campus boundaries. This assumption of uni-directional knowledge relationships between Universities and communities reflects and constitutes particular power/knowledge relationships and forms of public engagement. Impact, as presently imagined, is unlikely to alter prevalent elite perspectives on who the producers and consumers of knowledge are.

In contrast, geographers working with participatory and activist modes of knowledge production develop research partnerships with a range of collaborators (for example, statutory bodies with a responsibility for policy development; voluntary, activist and grassroots organisations who contest state policy; informal groupings such as residents, young people, and so on). Where knowledge is co-produced, impact is two-way: research may inform society, but its own agendas, design, conduct and outcomes are also profoundly informed and shaped by various users, publics and participants (Fuller and Askins 2010; Kindon et al 2007). The REF could be designed to acknowledge and encourage such two-way relationships: relevance and accountability would be better produced were the metric of impact to be explicitly attentive to instances in which academics listen, not only talk, to the rest of society.

Scale of engagement does not equate to quality of impact

Our second observation centres on another form of hierarchy being in danger of (re)production through HEFCE's proposals: the impact of academic work on industrial, economic and formal social policy interventions is emphasised over researchers' involvement and collaboration with

grassroots organisations. At the same time, the proposals suggest the use of geographical scale and reach as a proxy for the utility, value or significance of exceptional impact (and they are not alone in this tendency – see Pain 2006). As Johnston (2008) has shown, the evaluation of what is ‘world-leading’ is always subjective and fraught with difficulty. Crucially here, the proposals largely replicate for ‘impact’ the definitional logic applied to ‘outputs’ (journal articles); they construct an inappropriate hierarchy of scale that imagines only research that can be constituted as having ‘international’ and ‘national’⁵ impacts as worthy of grading as ‘exceptional’ and ‘excellent’. While the criteria for measuring outputs differ somewhat to those for impact, in the absence of a statement to the contrary the proposals threaten an easy slippage between the impact descriptor ‘major value or significance/wide-ranging’ and scale unit ‘national/international’, and between ‘incremental/modest’ and ‘local’ (HEFCE 2009). Our concern is that while collaborative participatory and activist research projects may be international and involve a wide range of people and organisations, they often work intensively with local communities and small groups of people. There is no practical or intellectual incompatibility between significant and transformative impacts and research that is deeply engaged at a local level. However, if ‘local’ becomes synonymous with ‘modest impact’ then the danger is not simply that some academics and units will remain unrecognised and unrewarded for excellent work, but more perniciously, audit-orientated institutions might actively discourage research that involves ‘only’ local dialogue, contexts and outcomes. Any accountancy-based tendency to prioritise quantity, extent and reach at the expense of the quality of impacts and the accountability of researchers should be resisted.

Impact can occur throughout research processes not just from research outputs

As currently conceived, definitions of impact assume that the results and *outputs* of research are the only, or at least primary, means by which research has impacts on wider society. In this model, ‘research’ and ‘impact’ are separated in time, and researchers and users usually occupy separate spaces and activities. As Meth and Williams (2010) point out, this kind of relationship between projects and impacts has been ‘widely discredited in policy studies research’. Indeed

⁵ For geographers, it is especially problematic that scale is imagined in fixed ontological terms.

the 'simple, mechanistic causal process' linking a project with its impact has been one of the key concerns raised in the recent REF impact pilot (Reisz 2010).

An important point that is missed both in the proposals and in the pilot is that the *process* of collaborative research with non-academic partners and participants often has significant value and generate impacts in itself: for example, including the sharing of knowledge and skills, capacity building, comprehension and empowerment among participants, and iterative dissemination and impact. Given that impact is two-way, as we argued above, collaborative research processes also result in more embedded, responsive and socially relevant research among academics⁶. If such impacts are to be encouraged and not stifled by future audits, the extent and quality of these processes deserves a central place in the evaluation of impact, as well as follow-up (time-lagged) impacts and outputs.

Such an approach may seem to create problems for an audit culture that is obsessed with straightforward, immediately (and preferably quantitatively) measurable indicators. As Johnston (2008) showed in his analysis of RAE2008 categorisation and grading, the three criteria within that round, 'originality', 'rigour' and 'significance', were only ever open to subjective evaluation. Despite this, it could be argued that outcomes are easier to measure than processes. And yet, away from the harder end of the spectra of sciences and social sciences, 'softer' methods of evaluation which are amply capable of robust measurement of aspects of process are widespread (Meth and Williams 2010).

One critical response might be that measuring process does not measure 'research impact', as for example processes may involve a lot of collaboration, effort and work, and yet produce no tangible impacts at a later date. Indeed impact can never, in any research, be guaranteed. However, this position is still based upon a linear model of impact that ignores the benefits that the process of collaboration has, and the impacts that arise from research projects, well before their end. These impacts are *part* of the rationale of working with, rather than on, research

⁶ The importance of process in research has also emerged as central throughout an ESRC funded seminar series titled 'Engaging Geography' – see www.engaginggeography.wordpress.com

participants and other involved organisations. If they are asked to wait until the research is complete before benefiting from it, their wait may be a long one and, as time passes, the impacts may be less and less likely to be relevant to them. But if they are involved with us throughout the process, whether in setting questions, taking decisions, troubleshooting, conducting initial analysis of (or simply having conversations about) emerging themes and findings, or raising awareness about the research and setting up dissemination pathways, then there are more likely to be impacts through and from the research process itself. Rather than the simple and linear notion of 'impact' (a word which according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* means 'striking', 'collision', 'influence', 'effect' - a single significant blow, limited in time), what takes place in effective knowledge co-production is a more diverse and porous series of smaller transformative actions that arise through changed understanding among all of those involved. These transformative actions may well (or, like any knowledge production, may not) result in a later, larger 'impact' of the type HEFCE favours; but importantly, they arise earlier too, and mean that change is more likely to be sustained as it is situated within the people, organisations and places involved in the research.

Under this understanding of impact, then, aspects of process that might be added to the criteria for measuring (producing) impact include:

- The extent to which research questions are defined through collaboration with participants and users,
- The extent to which analysis, interpretation, dissemination of findings are conducted jointly between researchers, participants and users,
- The extent to which non-academic participants and users are involved in related activities such as training in particular skills or knowledge, workshops, conference presentations, writing and publishing, and so on.

Concluding thoughts

As participatory and activist geographers, we will continue to conduct research with communities and participants in ways that work towards impact beyond the academy, irrespective of the forces of audit. That is not to grant ourselves lofty exemption from the effects or production of audit - we all have a role in their reproduction, and are part of the machine that generates the procedures of audit. Such complicity allows the production of an academy in which institutional reproduction (and associated personal success) has become the primary focus not just the necessary condition of our activities. But the way forward is not just self-critique in the pages of journals (and we recognise that this self-critique is inescapably ironic as we author this paper ["do you think this one will count for the REF?"]). Instead, we suggest that there is far more potential to work between the lines, against the grain and beyond the vision of audit than many acknowledge. Our cautious welcome of the REF impact agenda is not an acceptance of a neoliberal logic that further and more detailed accountancy is the best means to make publically funded universities accountable, or to ensure that we strive towards a misguided notion of what excellent research is. Rather, it underlines our ethical commitment to the co-production of research, and our call for this to be more widely valued beyond a tick-box of shallow public engagement. There is a political imperative to restate the kind of academy in which we want to work, and, in this case, to intervene in the development of research assessment, so that the impact agenda does not become one more metric producing and retrenching a certain model of power/knowledge relationships between academic research and wider society.

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